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Intelligence a Tough Job, CIA Official Says

By BETH ROSENBERG
Staff Writer

One of the hardest parts of providing intelligence information to U.S. policy-makers is making it interesting and responsive.

Robert Gates, a Wichita native and deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency's intelligence division, knows that very well.

"One of the hardest things in intelligence is to present the information to make busy policy-makers read the material," he said Wednesday in a rare interview. "And it's not just making it more interesting, but responding better to their needs.

"There's a danger in Langley (the CIA's Virginia headquarters) that you may do work that's not relevant to the policy agenda."

Gates, 38, who was in Wichita visiting his family, said his division not only must provide analytic support to policy-makers, but also warn them of what might be coming.

"On the research side, it's trying to identify things over the horizon," he said. "You have to study and put the mosaic together — to tell people to raise the flag, that the problem is coming, although it won't make itself felt for 5 to 10 years."

GATES SAID he thought of the process as scientific, although sometimes there is no evidence to predict what might happen.

Sometimes when the CIA gets information from far-flung places, he said, "You have to look at people who lived in the area. They have no evidence but do have instincts. Occasionally you have to go on that."

Gates serves as CIA Director William Casey's principal adviser on intelligence analysis and directs the agency's intelligence division. He specializes in Soviet history and policy.

Since his childhood years in College Hill, Gates has earned three college degrees and spent most of the past 16 years with the CIA.

His career as an intelligence adviser took Gates to Vienna and Geneva for the SALT talks in 1971 and 1973, to the White House for Richard Nixon's final days, and on two occasions to the National Security Council.

Gates, soft-spoken and professorial in a gray suit, said he returned to the security council the second time because he felt Zbigniew Brzezinski's approach to the Soviet Union was realistic.

ALTHOUGH President Reagan has demonstrated a hard-line approach toward the Soviets, Gates said, the president has not sought the agency's advice more than previous administrations.

"We've been pretty active all along in trying to explain what the Soviet Union is about to policy makers," said Gates, who believes the Cold War never ended.

"I believe that Soviet objectives and ambitions have remained unchanged through it all. Perhaps it's our perceptions rather than (a change in the) Soviets."

The Reagan administration has given high priority to supporting the CIA with financial resources and legislation, Gates said.

"You can't have a first class intelligence service and do it on the cheap," he said. "Now we're looking at what do we need to do the job right. From my standpoint, it's long overdue."

REAGAN POLICY "has turned around some trends that from our own point of view probably were not good for the U.S," he said. "It's made a difference in morale."

Gates became interested in history during his school years at College Hill Elementary, Robinson Junior High and East High. He went on to received his bachelor's degree from the College of William and Mary, his master's from Indiana University, and his doctorate in Russian and Soviet history from Georgetown University.

AFTER HE finished at Indiana University, Gates applied to the CIA because, he said, his degree prepared him for two careers — government or teaching.

"The agency seemed a more interesting place than the Department of State," he said. "The diplomacy aspect didn't appeal to me much. And there's no given with the State Department that I could stay with Russian history."

Gates said he felt strongly about his Kansas roots, including his parents, Mel and Isabel, and his brother, Jim, principal at Southeast High.

"There's something about coming from the Midwest," he said. "I felt a basic common sense and practicality and general decency that were characteristic of growing up here. Those are things that help you in Washington."